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ABSTRACT

A statewide survey of elementary and secondary teachers in Texas indicates that little attention is currently given to direct teaching about aging or to integrating this content area into the school curriculum. The following questions were asked: (1) To what extent is aging incorporated into the public school curricula? (2) Would increased involvement in teaching about aging be achieved if instructional materials were available? (3) Have efforts in teaching aging been perceived as successful by those who do teach this content area? and (4) What is the likelihood that teachers would become involved in short-term inservice training to prepare them to deal with aging issues? Results indicated that, if instructional materials were available, many teachers would teach concepts of aging. A majority of respondents indicated interest in inservice programs relating to aging. (JD)

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AGING EDUCATION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS - - COMING OF AGE?*

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INTRODUCTION

Patricia Harris of the Department of Health and Human Services recently expressed concern for improving programs for the elderly in the coming years (Report on Education Research, May, 1980). One method of attaining this goal is to increase the likelihood that future generations have a deeper understanding and respect for the aging process.

People today are living longer than ever before. The elderly are now among the most rapidly growing minorities in our society. Recent projections have suggested that by the year 2000 the percentage of the total population of persons 65 and over could increase to 11.2% (Atchley, 1977). Projections for the year 2030 are as high as 17% (Cole and Harris, 1977). If we are to increase chances that the quality of life for the upcoming masses of senior citizens will increase with the quantity of years, education concerning the aging process and the elderly will require more attention than traditionally given.

Recent socio-economic conditions and the tremendous increase in single parent families have forced millions of adult members of

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families to seek employment away from the home. Thus, increasing responsibility for teaching about aging and other curricular areas has fallen upon the schools. Recognizing the importance of teaching about aging in the schools, one of the major concerns of the White House Conference on Aging in 1971 was that knowledge about aging become a part of the American educational curricula from preschool through higher education. Since the early 70's research and curricular materials concerning aging have increased considerably. Yet, as the statewide survey of Texas teachers described in this paper indicates, little attention is currently given to direct teaching about aging or to integrating this content area into the public curricular.

METHOD

An instrument was developed* to address the following issues: (1) To what extent is aging incorporated into the public school curricula? (2) Would increased involvement in teaching about aging be achieved if instructional materials were available? (3) Have efforts in teaching aging been perceived as successful by those who do teach this content area? and (4) What is the likelihood that teachers would become involved in short-term inservice training to better prepare teachers to deal with aging issues? The questionnaire was sent to a computer-generated random sample (N=500) of all elementary and secondary school teachers in Texas. Forty-eight

*The researchers gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Hiram J. Friedson, Carol Seefeldt, and James Hauwiller for critiquing the instrument used in the investigation.

percent of the sample (N=235) responded to the instrument,

RESULTS

Replies from 48% of the sample resulted in the following major findings: (1) only 3.6% of the sample made specific provisions for teaching about aging; (2) of those who did not teach about aging, 40.6% indicated they would include this area if instructional materials were available; (3) of those who did teach about aging, over half (51.4%) felt their efforts were successful and only 6.4% indicated their efforts failed; and (4) when asked if short-term in-service training were available, 68% indicated they would or probably would participate in order to better prepare themselves to teach about aging.

DISCUSSION

The past decade has seen increased interest in teaching about aging in the professional literature. Yet, as the present study suggests, a hiatus currently exists between the expressed interests of professionals in the field and actual instructional practice. Nearly half of the public school teachers surveyed (44.5%) indicated they do not teach about aging. Of those who did indicate some instruction was being conducted, only 3.6% indicated that such teaching was being done in a systematic manner. The majority of teachers (52%) indicated they teach about aging only when opportunities arise "spontaneously."

Since teaching about aging is done so unsystematically, it is little wonder that 42.7% of those who teach aging concepts are unsure of the effectiveness of their efforts. Unless teaching of this area can be done in a much more systematic manner, it is unlikely that school systems who herald slogans of teacher accountability and effectiveness will be convinced of the value of aging education.

Perhaps the strongest implication for educational practices emerging from this study were in the areas of need for increased materials and inservice preparation for teachers. If instructional materials were available, 40.6% of those who indicated they do not teach about aging indicated they would teach concepts of aging in their current instructional program. While published curricular materials are currently in very short supply, several universities have developed pilot materials which would be most useful (Atwood, 1974, Bradley, 1976, Hauwiller et. al., 1978).

Finally, in addition to securing instructional materials relating to aging, teachers need to be aware of their existence and usefulness for given grade levels. An efficient method of making such materials known to teachers would be through inservice workshops. Nearly 70% of the teachers surveyed indicated interest in inservice programs relating to aging.

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